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ABSTRACT

In spring 1989, the United States watched intently as televised reports relayed the events unfolding in Beijing's (China) Tiananmen Square. This concern for a people whose culture and political institutions are significantly different reflects a continuing and compelling interest in China. Although historians and journalists in the United States long have observed a "special relationship" between the two countries, which has included periods of optimistic friendship as well as tragic conflict, China studies have been neglected in U.S. classrooms. Where it is not overlooked, China is too often the victim of stereotyping or specious generalizations. To encourage effective teaching about China, this ERIC Digest examines: (1) the political status of China; (2) reasons for teaching about China; (3) approaches to teaching about China; and (4) China's place in the pre-collegiate curriculum. (DB)

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Teaching about China

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In Spring 1989, Americans watched intently as televised reports relayed the events unfolding in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. This concern for a people whose culture and political institutions are significantly different from our own reflects a continuing and compelling interest in China. Although historians and journalists in the United States have long observed a "special relationship" between the two countries, which has included periods of optimistic friendship as well as tragic conflict, China studies have been neglected in American classrooms. Where it is not overlooked, China is too often the victim of stereotyping or specious generalization. To encourage effective teaching about China, this ERIC Digest examines (1) the political status of China, (2) reasons for teaching about China, (3) approaches to teaching about China, and (4) China's place in the pre-collegiate curriculum.

The Political Status of China. Contributing to the misunderstanding of China is a condition of political ambiguity, with the existence of the two Chinese republics (the mainland Peoples' Republic of China or PRC, and the Republic of China or ROC, on Taiwan) and Hong Kong, a British colony that will revert to the PRC on July 1, 1997. The PRC was founded in 1949 by the victorious Chinese Communist Party. The defeated Nationalist (Kuomintang) forces withdrew to the island of Taiwan, operating the ROC government there.

The United Nations voted to admit the PRC as the sole representative of China in 1971, and in 1979 the United States recognized the PRC. Despite the severing of diplomatic relations in 1979, the United States and Taiwan maintain extensive economic ties. Both Chinese republics consider Taiwan to be a part of one temporarily divided China. A burgeoning indirect trade exists between the two via Hong Kong; however, reunification is not expected in the near future.

Hong Kong will be the object of much attention as 1997 draws near. The PRC government has promised to retain Hong Kong's present social and economic systems for fifty years, but the future of the island remains uncertain. Analysts are waiting to see if the "tail" of the economically developed Hong Kong will be able to wag the "dog" of the developing mainland.

Reasons for Including China in the Curriculum. China's geographical size, population, and spheres of cultural and political influence are too vast to be ignored. The PRC has the world's third largest land area and is the world's most populous nation. Although Taiwan and Hong Kong are significantly smaller than the PRC, their political and economic importance have been disproportionately great. The various dialects of Chinese are spoken by more people than any other language, and Chinese culture has left an indelible imprint on East Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. Some observers have credited Confucian values, which originated in China, with contributing to the rapid economic development of Japan and the four Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) of Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Relations with the PRC will remain a crucial focus of United States foreign policy. Economic ties with Taiwan will continue despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties. Trade between Hong Kong and the PRC has been growing, and the transfer of Hong Kong in 1997 is certain to make it the most important entrepot for PRC trade with the West.

Chinese immigrants and their descendants have made substantial contributions to American society and culture. Chinese laborers participated in the construction of the transcontinental railroad which hastened the settlement of the American West. Chinese immigrants worked in mining operations in the West and on Southern plantations during Reconstruction. Chinese food has become as "American" as spaghetti or tacos. Today Chinese Americans are prominent in our culture. The works of Chinese American writers, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Bette Bao Lord, and Amy Tan have won critical acclaim and are consistently on best seller lists.

In an era in which we are coming to recognize the fact of global interdependence and the finite nature of the earth's resources, the complete integration of the PRC's one billion producer-consumers into the world economy poses a novel developmental challenge.

Strategies for Teaching About China. The following strategies can be employed to improve teaching and learning about China.

Combat stereotypes. Although Chinese culture influenced the cultures of other East Asian nations, East Asia is a region of political, economic, and cultural diversity. A comparative study of the region will help correct the stereotype of one monolithic East Asian cultural group which exists in the minds of many students. It is never too early to dispel the common notion that East Asians are "all the same."

There is significant diversity within China itself. In the PRC, fifty-five minority groups comprise 6% of the population, yet they inhabit more than 60% of the land mass. The Han Chinese majority is composed of various regional and dialect groups. Asking the question—"What does it mean to be Chinese?"—might lead students to examine cultural and ethnic versus geopolitical definitions of nationality, and then to discuss contemporary nationalist movements throughout the world.

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Encourage students to adopt new perspectives. Politicians, merchants, and missionaries have seen in China a vast potential market for political institutions, material goods, and souls; they have generally been frustrated. Americans in particular have fallen prey to their own overconfidence in dealing with China. It may surprise students to learn that that the traditional Chinese world view placed the Chinese empire unapologetically in the center of the world. This "middle kingdom" was encircled by "semi-civilized" tributary states, which were in turn surrounded by "uncivilized ones." Into this category fell the states of Western Europe and America. Having students assume this point of view may lead them to question their own ethnocentric values.

Chinese perspectives can be introduced in a variety of ways. At the primary level, compare Chinese folk sayings with those familiar to students of different ethnic backgrounds. Then ask students to collect and explain stories and aphorisms told in their own families. In secondary courses, present the thoughts of ordinary citizens to add an additional dimension to standard government and dissident opinions. Include works by women, whose contributions and ideas have been disregarded in the traditionally Confucian society. These viewpoints are becoming more readily available as they increasingly find their way into English translations.

Compare Chinese and Western modes of thought. Introduce Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, and discuss these philosophies as responses to universal human needs, rather than as mystical thought systems from the East. Compare Buddhism, which the Chinese transformed after receiving it from India, with philosophies and religions rooted in other parts of the world. Pay special attention to the social implications of these systems. Have secondary students read from *The Analects* to discover what Confucius really said. This will help to counter the "fortune cookie" image of Chinese philosophy which pervades American popular culture. To avoid exoticism, teachers can highlight similarities in the responses to underlying human concerns.

Introduce the Chinese language. While Chinese may never be as popular as Indo-European languages in secondary schools, it is being introduced in a growing number of school districts. Although spoken Chinese presents difficulties for non-specialist teachers, ideographic characters can be introduced at all levels. These characters have been adopted throughout East Asia, at times serving as a kind of *lingua franca* writing system for people speaking Japanese, Korean, and dialects of Chinese. Many survey works on China include diagrams tracing the evolution of specific characters. Today Chinese characters are organized systematically according to radical elements within them which give clues to meaning and/or pronunciation. Teachers might introduce common radicals and then challenge students to guess possible meanings of more complex characters containing them. Chinese calligraphers could be invited to demonstrate the aesthetic qualities of the Chinese writing system.

Avoid common pitfalls. When discussing China, use an objective tone. The United States or Western nations in general should not be presented as the ideal to which all other nations should aspire. There are many routes to modernization, and modernization and tradition are not necessarily antagonistic. NICs like Taiwan have achieved prosperity without following Western models.

Ask appropriate questions. For example, when reviewing United States-Chinese relations, the question is not how the United States "lost" mainland China to the Communists, but what factors contributed to the ascendance of the Chinese Communist Party, or how Americans came to view China as "ours" to begin with. Be wary of facile dichotomies and sweeping generalizations. The world is not simply divided into East-West or "us-them" dichotomies. Americans are not all of one stripe, and neither are the one billion Chinese.

Become familiar with frequently used Chinese personal and place names. There are two common romanization systems for Chinese characters: *pinyin*, used in the PRC and increasingly by scholars and journalists outside China, and the Wade-Giles system, most popular in the West until recently. The two systems are different enough to confuse students. For example, "Peking" and "Mao Tse-tung" in the Wade-Giles system become "Beijing" and "Mao Zedong" in *pinyin*. With a bit of preparation, the teacher can help to prevent misunderstandings.

The Place of China in the Curriculum. Politicians, journalists, scholars, and educators alike are still assessing the meaning of recent events in China, Eastern Europe, South Africa, and the Middle East. Perhaps the clearest lesson for curriculum planners is that global studies should be incorporated wherever possible into the curricula of elementary and secondary schools. A flexible current affairs centered approach opens students' eyes and directs their concerns to the vast and complex world around them. Students also need a wide background of historical and cultural awareness which will prepare them to follow new developments.

China can be introduced into the curriculum in most subjects and at all grade levels. In the primary grades it will be a simple matter to read Chinese stories and folktales, to examine the Chinese celebration of New Year's or another holiday, or to teach children to count on a Chinese abacus. Secondary teachers will find it easy to highlight Chinese topographical features in a geography class, to view events like the Korean War from the Chinese perspective in US history classes, or to compare contemporaneous developments in China in courses on world history.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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